

Life... My skin is raw from constantly washing my hands

S i t u a t i o n :

I've got a fear of germs – big time. I'm constantly washing, and washing, and washing my hands. I know it's pretty much turned into an obsession. At home it's more or less constant. I do work, and have some level of control over the constant cleansing when I'm away from home. After being out I feel so contaminated that when I get to my apartment the ritual starts and I keep it up for over an hour.

Listening to all those commercials about anti-bacterial products makes me even more scared of germs.

Weekends are worse – I guess because I'm not away from home for most of the day and there's nothing to distract my attention. By Sunday night the skin on my hands is sore and chapped. Can you suggest anything that might help me stop?

A n s w e r :

The media does have a way of intensifying our fears doesn't it? You can go from being mildly concerned to panicky during a two-hour program.

One of the key points you mention is that you do control your hand-washing habit when you're away – which means with practice, you will be able to restrain yourself at home as well.

You didn't mention repetitive thoughts, but that's part of what you'll need to do to break the habit – and even though your condition could be labeled a compulsion, it's a habit, a habit you can learn to stop. The standard meaning for the word "compulsion" is something you "can't" control. Habits on the other hand, can be controlled through effort.

When you're at the sink, be aware of what you're thinking. If your insecure thought is, "My hands still aren't clean," replace it with the realistic/secure thought, "My hands are clean!" Notice the exclamation point at the end of that statement. It's the tone of "voice" you're most probably going to have to use in the beginning to interrupt the obsessive thoughts. Telling yourself that your hands are contaminated is making you feel unsafe – you think there is some kind of danger. Telling yourself they "are clean" eliminates that danger.

Immediately after you repeat your safe/secure phrase, reach out and turn the water off. If you think, "I can't," replace that thought with, "I can." If your arms hesitate, follow through. You are in charge! You do have the self-discipline to direct your muscles to do what you want them to do. You're not a robot with someone else at the controls, even though it may feel that way sometimes.



I'll warn you that controlling an impulse, in your case the impulse is to "keep washing," is going to be uncomfortable. Stopping that "urge" to continue lathering your hands isn't going to happen like magic. It's going to take your effort – using both your mind and your body, your thoughts and your muscles.

In fact it will probably be more uncomfortable to stop than to persist squirting on the soap and water. The discomfort will pass in a short time as long as you restate the scary thoughts with more realistic ones.

Do get away from the sink. As you march away, with each step – tell yourself, "My hands are clean. I'm in no danger. I am safe." If you have the notion to go back to the sink, stop, don't allow your legs to carry you back to that spot. It's off limits for now!

If all this sounds like work, I won't kid you, it is. It also seems kind of childish talking to yourself. The truth is, you're talking yourself into the scrubbing routine and you can use the same method – your thoughts – to help you overcome the habit.

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